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ABSTRACT

A major problem in the study of marital interaction has been the lack of attention to contextual determinants of differences within couples' behavioral exchanges. To compare spouses' control behaviors in overt and ongoing communication as a function of both conflict and intimacy situational contexts, and to analyze the influence of spouse's role, couples engaged in discussions of conflict and nonconflict issues of high and low intimacy context. Taped interactions were coded by trained observers. The findings demonstrated that the nature of marital behavior control was a function of contextual diversity. Couples' use of behavior control strategies to increase and decrease each other's behavior was influenced in opposite directions by the conflict dimension of the interaction context. Intimacy, in conjunction with conflict, also produced significant differences in the exchanges between partners. (Author)

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The Nature of Behavior Control Strategies of Happily Married Couples As A Function of the Interactional Context

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The study of interpersonal interaction has a broad and diverse theoretical and empirical background. Social penetration theory (Altman, 1973; Altman & Taylor, 1973) provides a broad-based account of (a) overt interpersonal behaviors which take place in social interaction and (b) internal subjective processes which are associated with overt exchange. Both types of processes are used to explain relationship development and dissolution alike. A central issue embraced by social penetration theory is the exchange of behaviors which leads to a particular balance of rewards and costs in both immediate and forecasted interactions. Both the rate and level of relationship development is said to be a function of a reward/cost dynamic. The social penetration process is also described as a function of situational and environmental determinants, including role relationships. Although Altman and Taylor's (1973) dimensions of situational determinants and role relationships are rather broad, one could identify various specific situational dimensions relevant to particular dyadic relationships. Marital relationships are likely to represent Altman and Taylor's Stage 4 relationship development: Stable exchange level of social penetration where "dyadic members know one another well and can readily predict the feelings and probable behavior of the other (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 140)." It should be noted, however, that the social penetration process is probably never complete insofar as there is continual fluctuation in the level at which

relationships operate. While social penetration theory provides a comprehensive explaination of the processes and determinants of relationship functioning, empirical tests of the overt behavioral process in relationship development have been inadequate within this framework.

A separate body of literature has originated from the social learning tradition where analysis of overt behaviors has been focused on differences in the exchange of positive and negative verbal behaviors between spouse and stranger dyads and between distressed and nondistressed married couples in conflict situations (Birchler, Weiss & Vincent, 1975; Vincent, Weiss & Birchler, 1975; Weiss, Hops & Patterson, 1973). Research within this framework has provided important contributions to the development of methodological procedures for observing complex overt marital interactions (Hops, Wills, Weiss & Patterson, 1972). However, empirical investigation of marital interaction as a function situational contexts has not been adequate.

It seems particularly important to integrate the observational study of marital interaction with the identification of distinct situational and role dimensions characteristic of marital relationships. Recent discussions of social interaction research tend to highlight the importance of looking toward contextual variation as an important determinant of interpersonal behavior (Argyle, 1979; Cairns, 1979, Ginsburg, 1979). An assessment of contextual influences adds another potentially important source of variation

in describing differences in interpersonal behavior, additional to that accounted for by the individual and by the dyadic system.

A major problem in the study of marital interaction has been the lack of attention to contextual determinants of variation within couples' behavioral exchanges. The goal has more often been to account for differences in interaction by looking at presumed stable characteristics of the relationship (e.g., distressed vs. nondistressed; clinic vs. nonclinic) or differences in role relationships between dyads (e.g., stranger vs. spouse).

One primary difficulty in studying the influence of context on social interaction is that there exists no typology of relevant contexts for marital relationships. A second difficulty is a definitional one. Whereas some contexts are determined by concrete physical characteristics (e.g., home, office, school), other social contexts are not (e.g., context of conflict, high intimacy). The use of improvisation scenes, a procedure developed by Olson and Ryder (1970) and later modified by others (Gottman, 1979; Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974), provides one solution to the second problem. Improvisation allows the researcher to standardize the situational context across couples by providing situations of interaction for which the couples are given generally defined issues, but within which they have considerable flexibility in selecting their behavior.

The major purpose of this study was to compare spouses' control behaviors in overt and ongoing communication as a function of both conflict and intimacy situational dimensions. For this purpose,

a two-level scoring system was developed to distinguish differences in exchange characterizing interaction in differing contexts. One level of analysis suggested by social learning theory is functional behavior control, or the process whereby change in spouses' behavior is a function of the consequent events or behaviors produced by the partner. Since it would be very difficult to empirically determine the functional control of a given interactional behavior on the other spouse's subsequent behavior, verbal behavior control strategies were defined as theoretically effective by their content. Verbal reinforcers, punishers, and instructions or requests for change were included as verbal behavior control strategies. Verbal statements about oneself or questions for information, although they may indeed function to alter spouse's behavior, were not considered as direct and overt behavior control efforts and were thus defined as verbal behavior noncontrol strategies.

The second level, a finer analysis than the first, parallels the behavioral excesses and deficits notion of Kanfer and Phillips (1970). Behavior control strategies were further conceptualized as exchanges which would theoretically alter spouses' behaviors by either increasing or decreasing some property of it. No cognitive intentions of spouses were inferred in this study. However, to the extent that spouses could predict the effect of their own behaviors on each other, the use of a control strategy to increase behavior would likely be employed in an effort to increase spouse's

deficit behaviors. Behavior control strategies for increasing behavior were defined by the use of positive verbal exchanges (positive verbal reinforcement) or by direct requests to spouse for an increase in behavior. Behavior control strategy for decreasing behavior were defined by use of negative verbal exchanges (verbal punishers) or by direct requests to spouse for a decrease in behavior. It should be noted that the control strategies are defined as efforts toward change in spouse behavior and should not be confused with actual or effective change.

The major hypotheses of the present study were initially derived from both social penetration theory and social learning theory. Both theories emphasize the importance of situational determinants (social penetration theory) or environmental stimuli as discriminative for certain behaviors (social learning theory). Behavior which occurs within marital interaction should then also be influenced by the contextual or situational events which precede it. Raush et al. (1974) suggest that "contextual variables operate as a signal system, enhancing some sets of events and patterns among events and attenuating other sets and patterns (p. 27)." The context in which communication occurs is then argued to exert control over spouses' behaviors.

The selection of conflict as one particular contextual dimension was guided by social penetration theory which suggests that (a) conflict is inevitable within interpersonal relationships and (b) processes involved in conflict management operate according to the same principles as other forms of interaction, specifically

with relation to reward/cost factors (Altman & Taylor, 1973). In addition, Gottman (1979) noted that virtually all studies of marital interaction are conducted using conflict tasks only, leaving comparisons of interactions in conflict situations with other contexts unaddressed. Social penetration theory suggests that conflict, although inevitable, is more threatening to the relationship than nonconflict insofar as it potentially induces uncertainty and change, even if for the better. Therefore, it was predicted that in conflict situations persons would more likely use control strategies to decrease spouse's behavior in an effort to constrain their spouses' behavior in a threatening and unpredictable situation. Conversely, control strategies to increase behavior were predicted to occur less often in conflict situations[1].

A second major hypothesis concerning the intimacy dimension of the situational context was also derived from social penetration theory. Altman and Taylor (1973) argued that areas of higher level intimacy produce more "unique-to-the-dyad events . . . fewer stereotyped and culturally defined modes of exchange (p. 168)." Thus it could be argued that marital behavior control efforts should change as the context shifts from low to high intimacy. One should expect spouses to more likely (by the use of control strategies to decrease behavior) attempt to constrain their partner's

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[1]It should be noted that behavior control strategies to increase and decrease behavior are not the inverse of each other since a third category of extraneous control efforts was utilized, thus avoiding the problem of ipsitivity.

behavior in high intimacy areas since they represent more vulnerable areas of interaction and therefore are also likely to be more threatening. Again, efforts to increase partner's behavior should occur more often in areas of low level intimacy, since that context should provide more flexibility of appropriate interaction due to its increased breadth.

Social penetration theory also provides support for a hypothesis concerning the interaction between the contextual dimensions conflict and intimacy. The theory suggests that interaction about conflict issues in areas of high level intimacy is more threatening to the relationship than is superficial incompatibility, thus persons would seem more likely to differentiate control efforts toward their partner's behavior between conflict and nonconflict situations when the context is one of high intimacy than when it is low intimacy.

A final hypothesis concerning role relationships between husband and wife was initially suggested by social penetration theory. The theory differentiates interpersonal processes between partners whose role relationships differ (e.g., relationships formed to fulfill themselves, such as love, marriage, friendships vs. those oriented toward task completion). An extension of the theory to address differences in interpersonal behaviors of partners as a function of role of spouse as husband or wife was made. Given the traditional role definitions which characterize most husband/wife relationships even in most of today's marriages (Bernard, 1972), marital role relationships are inextricably bound to gender roles. Thus, the

roles of husband and wife were hypothesized to produce differences in the behavior control processes of marital interaction.

Since behavior control efforts in the present study are limited to overt and direct actions[2], their use should be greater by husbands than wives (Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Rubin & Zellman, 1978; Johnson, 1976). Indirect use of control efforts, especially reward and coercion, are more correspondent with sex-role expectations for women than direct use of these powers, according to these authors. Since the concepts of control strategies to increase and decrease behaviors to a large degree parallel direct use of reward and coercion, respectively, it was predicted that husbands would use both more control strategies to increase and decrease spouse's behavior than would wives.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were fifty-two happily-married couples that were recruited for participation through newspaper advertisements. Interaction data were analyzed for thirty-seven couples who meet the criteria for inclusion in the study: (a) written response "yes" by both spouses to the question, "Are you happily married", (b) a minimum score of 100 for both spouses on the Locke-Wallace Short

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[2]See Frieze et al. (1978, p. 311) for discussion of differences between direct and indirect use of reward and coercive power.

Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), and (c) uninvolvement of both spouses in therapy at the time of the study. All subjects were Caucasian. Husbands' and wives' mean ages were 31 and 29 years, respectively; the ages ranged from 19 to 61 years.

Procedure

Couples were given written instructions for the interaction phase of the study, an improvisation procedure similar to that used in previous studies of marital interaction (Gottman, 1979; Olson & Ryder, 1970; Raush et al., 1974). The conflict contextual dimension was manipulated by either (a) separate and different instructions to generate a (high) conflict of interest between partners for a particular scene (conflict context), or (b) separate but identical instructions to generate no conflict of interest between partners (nonconflict context). Two improvisation scenes were designed to generate conflict situations and the remaining two, nonconflict situations. Half of the improvisation scenes each were constructed around high-level or low-level intimacy content. These topics were selected from a pool of items which had been similarly scaled for intimacy value in two separate studies (Malonf, 1974; Taylor & Altman, Note 3). Partners participated in each of the counterbalanced improvisation scenes for five minutes each. Verbal interactions were audiotape recorded for subsequent analysis.

Verbal interactions were first unitized into "speeches" or "all words spoken by a single speaker from the time [s/he] starts

to speak until [s/he] stops (Schultz, 1975, p. 563)." Unitized speeches were then coded for content. Speeches were coded at the first level as (a) behavior control, (b) behavior noncontrol, or (c) other verbal behavior strategy; then behavior control efforts were subsequently coded as (a) control strategy to increase spouse's behavior, (b) control strategy to decrease spouse's behavior, or (c) other control strategy. Data from the second level of analysis are presented here.

Dependent measures were figured as rates of occurrence for control strategies to decrease (BCD) and increase (BCI) behavior. A pool of eight raters were trained to a training criteria of an average interrater trial reliability (based on average across 20 reliability sessions) exceeding Cohen's Kappa value (Cohen, 1960) of .60. Cohen's Kappa was used to set criteria for reliability training because (a) it is a conservative estimate of reliability since it corrects for chance agreement due to uneven marginal frequencies and (b) it estimates reliability on a unit-by-unit basis, thus assuring agreement on individual units of interaction. Reliability estimates for rates of BCD and BCI were figured by pairwise comparisons between independent observers on improvisation scene totals using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. A counterbalanced sample of 37 improvisation scenes (25% of total), one per couple, were selected for reliability estimation. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were r = .67 for BCI and r = .69 for BCD.

Results

Preliminary results revealed that husbands and wives tended to rate the intimacy-scaled issues consistent with the intended manipulation. On an 11-pt. scale, partners provided significantly higher ratings for high than low intimacy-scaled issues (*Ms* = 8.2 and 5.4, respectively), t (73) = 3.24, $p < .01$. Ratings by husbands and wives revealed no significant differences.

Further preliminary analyses were conducted to test for a significant effect due to order of presentation of improvisational scenes. No such effects were found, thus data were collapsed across the conflict and intimacy dimensions.

As a general analytic strategy, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedure (Cohen & Burns, Note 4) was selected to accommodate potentially correlated dependent variables (Kraemer & Jacklin, 1979; Tatsuoka, 1971). Univariate analyses were performed subsequent to the discovery of significant multivariate differences. Orthogonal contrasts were developed to test differences between means.

Main Effects

The data confirmed the hypotheses that there would be more behavior control strategies to decrease spouses' behavior (BCD) and fewer behavior control strategies to increase spouses' behavior (BCI) in conflict than nonconflict situations. These main effects were significant for both univariate and multivariate analyses.

Insert Table 1 about here

The hypothesis that husbands would use more BCD's and BCI's than wives was confirmed only for BCI's. Wives used significantly more BCD's than their husbands, whereas husbands used significantly more BCI's than their wives. These main effects were significant at both the univariate and multivariate levels of analysis.

Insert Table 2 about here

The predicted effect of the intimacy context on verbal control strategies was not confirmed for either BCI or BCD in either the multivariate or univariate analyses.

Two-Way Interactions

As originally hypothesized the interaction between conflict and intimacy produced a significant effect on partners' verbal control strategies.

Insert Table 3 about here

Although not formally hypothesized, the two-way interaction between intimacy and role revealed significant differences for both BCI and BCD.

Insert Table 4 about here

Three-Way Interaction

Although not formally hypothesized, the interaction between conflict, intimacy, and role produced significant differences for one type of verbal control strategy only, BCD.

Insert Table 5 about here

Discussion

In total, these findings allow a more specific conceptualization of behavior control in intimate relationships as a function of contextual diversity. Results indicate that contextual variation is associated with differences in the pattern of verbal interaction between marital partners for both types of control strategies. Within this experimental investigation, marital partners differentiated their behavior control efforts towards each other as a function of both conflict and intimacy dimensions of the conversational context. A difference in behavior control efforts between husbands and wives was also found. Overall, these findings would suggest that couples adjust their interaction to accomodate the situation and that husbands and wives do so differently.

This research has provided general support for social learning theory principles applied to dyadic interaction such that the interpersonal exchanges are governed by discriminitive cues of the situational context. Thus these data underscore the importance of studying interaction as a function of contextual variables (Gottman, 1979)

More specifically, this research found that behavior control efforts by husbands and wives were modified as a function of whether the situation was conflict or nonconflict in nature. Previous research has shown that (a) spouses from both distressed and non-distressed couples exchange greater numbers of "negative" behaviors with each other than with strangers in conflict situations, and

(b) nondistressed partners exchanged higher rates of "positive" behaviors and lower rates of "negative" behaviors than distressed couples (Birchler- Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Birchler et al., 1975; Weiss, & Wampler, 1972; Vincent et al., 1975), but there has been little direct comparison of the types of exchanges between conflict and nonconflict situations. In the present study, the category of BCD's included what has been called "negative" behaviors, and higher rates of BCD's were found in conflict than nonconflict situations. Analogously, the category of BCI's included what others have named "positive" behaviors, and lower rates of these were found in conflict than nonconflict situations. Future comparisons of interaction behaviors between distressed and nondistressed couples would likely profit from an additional comparison of contexts within the conflict dimension, since the specific influence of context has been shown to play an integral role in couples' interactional patterns.

Given the opposite direction of the differences in control strategies between conflict and nonconflict contexts, one could argue that the married couples either (a) adapt to various contexts by altering the balance between forms of interactional behavior control, or (b) create different psychological contexts by the balance of behavior control strategies between them.

The present data also provide general support for the propositions of social penetration theory which assert that dyadic interaction alters as the intimacy level of the context changes. Although there was no main effect for the intimacy variable, its influence was significant as it interacted with the conflict dimension of the

interactional context. Social penetration theory suggests that conflict at more intimate levels of the relationship presents more threat to the stability of that relationship than does conflict at more superficial areas (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Couples' behavior in the present study appeared to parallel some of Altman & Taylor's (1973) ideas insofar as differences between conflict and nonconflict situations for both forms of behavior control depended upon the intimacy level of the context for interaction. Although it is largely unknown whether couples are successful in their efforts to control spouses' behavior differently, depending upon the context, their efforts suggest that they discriminate between conflict and nonconflict situations more clearly in high intimacy contexts. The more careful discrimination of behavior in conflict situations for high intimacy issues may reflect the greater potential for damage to the relationship about which Altman & Taylor (1973) discuss.

Extending the discussion of the importance of intimacy further, the significant interaction between all three contextual variables role, conflict, and intimacy, suggests that the intimacy dimension effects the difference between conflict and nonconflict contexts for one form of husbands' efforts at control more so than for their wives' similar control efforts. That is, husbands in this study seemed to "adjust" their strategies to decrease wives' behavior in conflict and nonconflict situations differently for high than for low intimacy situations. For husbands, the high intimacy situations set the stage for a relatively increased use of BCDs if the

interaction was conflictual. The implications point to the necessity for continued study of differences between the ways in which husbands and wives interact as relationship contexts begin to include high level of intimacy, especially when conflict inevitably arises within it.

This research also provides partial support for the propositions made by Frieze et al. (1978) and others which addresses differences in husbands' and wives' use of direct - indirect power in the interpersonal processes of marriage. Both behavior control strategies to increase and decrease spouses' behavior were defined as direct means of control in the present study. However, since husbands used only one form of control (BCI's) more often than their wives, and wives in fact used the other form of spouse control (BCD's) more often than their husbands, a more formative issue appears to be the factors which contribute to the differential use of these direct means of control.

The question which must be raised is why did the wives, more than husbands in this study, use direct forms of control to decrease their spouses' behavior, a finding contrary to prediction. One possible explaination is that the use control strategies to decrease behavior by these wives involved primarily personal coercion (Frieze et al., 1978) and little of the more direct and assertive forms of BCD's. Finer analyses of interactional units not possible in this study would be required to provide such an answer. In this case, wives may have exhibited disapproval or negative sanctions by their verbal behavior without the concrete coercive

power resources to back up their personal coercive efforts. If this were true, wives may have been "permitted" to engage in seemingly effective control efforts while simultaneously both spouses knew the limitations which surrounded those attempts.

A second possibility to explain wives' increased use of control strategies is one which relies on the idea that exchanges in long-term relationships or the relationship definition becomes less stereotypic and rigid over time in terms of socially defined behavior appropriate between husbands and wives (Morton, Alexander, & Altman, 1976). In this event, it may be that stereotypic role relationships, between men and women become tempered as the demands engendered by the viability of long-term relationships emerge.

This study provides direct implications for therapeutic efforts with spouses in long-term relationships. It is assumed that partners in a relationship such as marriage find it important to influence their spouses' behavior (Frieze et al., 1978). And it can be further asserted that difficulties in marriage may be associated with (a) displeasure in spouses' behavior and/or the inability to effectively create change. An assessment of relevant contextual influences on a couples' efforts toward mutual control might produce some rather significant advantages. First, a change in a couple's (or spouse's) behavior may become one of shifting discriminative control from one context to another, rather than perhaps a more formidable task of skill building. Second, a couple's observation of their own effective behavior in one setting may provide a potent model for their own behavior change in an

alternate context. Third, a contextual analysis of behavior control maximizes efforts to discover behavioral assets which provides a persuasive argument for the assessment of couples' behaviors and not global relationship characteristics.

In summary, the present study revealed some clear differences in husbands' and wives' behavior control strategies in conflict and intimacy situations. It also supported the utility of the coding system for observing control efforts of spouses. Overall, the study maintained McReynold's (1979) proposal for more comprehensive interactional assessment of contextual influences on human behavior.

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TABLE 1

Verbal Behavior Control Strategies for Conflict Dimension

Category	Conflict Percentage Rates	Nonconflict Percentage Rates	MS	df	F
BCI	.42	.74	7.54	1,72	93.47*
BCD	.43	.14	6.22	1,72	135.14*
BCI/BCD Composite				2,71	68.11*

*p < .001

TABLE 2

Verbal Behavior Control Strategies for Role Dimension

Category	Wives Percentage	Husbands Rates	MS	df	F
BCI	.55	.61	.36	1,72	4.35*
BCD	.32	.24	.50	1,72	8.15**
BCI/BCD composite				2,71	4.02*

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

TABLE 3

Verbal Behavior Control Strategies for Conflict x Intimacy Interaction

Category	Hi Int/Con	Hi Inc/NCon	Lo Int/Con	Lo Int/NCon	MS	df	F
	Percentage Rates						
BCI	.33	.85	.50	.64	2.57	1,72	46.33*
BCD	.48	.06	.38	.21	1.13	1,72	33.96*
BCI/BCD composite						2,61	23.32*

*p < .001

TABLE 4

Verbal Behavior Control Strategies for Intimacy x Role Interaction

Category	Wife/Hi Int	Wife/Lo Int	Husb/Hi Int	Husb/Lo Int	MS	df	F
	Percentage Rates						
BCI	.61	.49	.58	.64	.48	1,72	8.05*
BCD	.27	.38	.27	.22	.43	1,72	8.67*
BCI/BCD composite						2,71	5.02*

*$p < .01$

TABLE 5

Verbal Behavior Control Strategy, BCD, for Role x Conflict x Intimacy Interaction*

Role	Conflict		Conflict	
	Hi Int	Lo Int	Hi Int	Lo Int
usband	.49	.24	.05	.20
ife	.47	.52	.08	.23

Note: Multivariate $F = 6.72$, $df = 2,71$, $p < .01$

Univariate $F = 13.35$, $df = 1,72$, $MS = .45$, $p < .001$